

# The Washington Post

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## Paul Ryan's magical budget

By [Dana Milbank](#), Published: March 12

Paul Ryan's budget is an amazing and wondrous [document](#).

Not only does it [balance the budget in 10 years](#) while reducing tax rates, it also does so without any pain or suffering — or even breaking a sweat. It achieves not just the longtime goals of policymakers — “a safety net strengthened . . . retirement secured . . . a nation protected” — but also brings about changes in human nature that have bedeviled civilization from the beginning of time. “This budget ends cronyism; eliminates waste, fraud and abuse,” Ryan's plan promises.

“Now, how do we do this?” Ryan (R-Wis.), the House Budget Committee chairman, asked with a magician's flourish as he [unveiled his budget Tuesday morning](#).

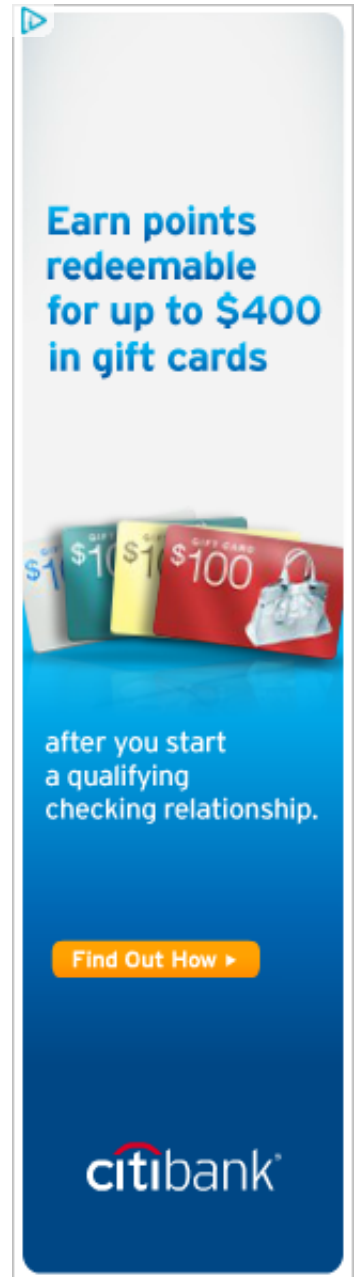
Here's how: The former Republican vice presidential candidate's budget eliminates \_\_\_\_ loopholes in the tax code, cutting the \_\_\_\_ and the \_\_\_\_ deductions. It reduces spending on the \_\_\_\_ program by \_\_\_\_ and the \_\_\_\_ program by \_\_\_\_\_. Retirees would see \_\_\_\_\_, students would experience \_\_\_\_\_ and the poor would be \_\_\_\_\_.

There are so many blanks in Ryan's budget that it could be a Mad Libs exercise. But this is not a game. It's black-box budgeting — an expression of lofty aims, with binders full of magic asterisks in lieu of specific cuts to government benefits. If this were a fitness plan, Ryan, a former personal trainer, would be telling Americans that under his revolutionary program, they could lose 50 pounds in 10 weeks without dieting or working out.

How, Ryan was asked, would he reduce tax rates without going after such popular items as the mortgage-interest deduction and the charitable-giving deduction?

“Yeah, so this is what the Ways and Means Committee is going to do,” he replied.

Mostly, Ryan would achieve his aims through sleight of hand. The recent tax increase on wealthy Americans that Ryan and fellow Republicans opposed? He keeps it in his budget. The \$716 billion cut to Medicare he blasted President Obama for? Ryan keeps that, too.



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How about the “sequester,” those automatic spending cuts that Republicans condemn? Ryan preserves those in perpetuity, at least for domestic programs. He proposes abolishing Obamacare — a futile gesture — but would pocket for other purposes \$1 trillion in tax increases that came with the program.

In subtle ways, Ryan's budget acknowledges the results of November's election. He isn't seeking to do away with tax increases that have already been approved, and he accepts that tax revenue will be 19.1 percent of the economy in a decade, up from the 18.7 percent he assumed last year.

But otherwise, he continues to peddle the same ideas: the partial privatization of Medicare; a 10 percent reduction in the federal workforce; and cuts to Medicaid, food stamps, education, job training and farm programs.

Public Radio International's Todd Zwillich pointed out that Republicans lost the presidency, House seats and the combined popular vote in House races. “People outside this process might wonder if elections have consequences,” Zwillich said.

“Look, whether the country intended it or not, we have divided government,” Ryan replied, suggesting that Republicans somehow won the debate while losing the election. “Are a lot of these solutions very popular, and did we win these arguments in the campaign?” Ryan asked himself. “Some of us think so.”

The Budget Committee chairman essentially acknowledged that his plan relies on the fantasy that Obamacare will be repealed. “We will never be able to balance the budget if you keep Obamacare going,” he said in response to a question from CBS's Nancy Cordes.

Tuesday's flimflammy began when Ryan and his fellow Budget Committee members took the stage. Ryan was accompanied by 13 other white guys in suits, but he had the two women in the group standing immediately behind him, where they would be on camera. He played down the sacrifices inherent in his budget, using the word “cut” only twice and only in broad terms: “we cut wasteful spending . . . this budget cuts spending by \$4.6 trillion over 10 years.”

But the Q&A in the House TV studio quickly entangled the master of illusion in his own trickery.

CNN's Dana Bash asked whether Ryan was being “disingenuous” by including new taxes that he opposed.

“We're not going to refight the past,” he explained.

If Ryan is “not going to fight the past,” Fox News's Chad Pergram asked, why is he still trying to repeal Obamacare?

“This to us is something that we're not going to give up on,” Ryan answered, “because we're not going to give up on destroying the health-care system for the American people.”

Even a skilled illusionist can have the occasional Freudian slip.

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